

Tasmanian College of the Arts
University of Tasmania

**Continuing the Ellipse: A Re-contextualisation of the
Calligraphic Tradition through Compression,
Subtraction and Erasure**

by
Stephen Woodbury MFA
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Abstract

This research sought to build on and extend the 3,500-year progression of calligraphy towards gestural abstracted marks derived from text. This project provides input to the discourse regarding authenticity versus style in contemporary painting, and is situated within the current blending of Eastern calligraphic and Western abstract traditions.

Exploring this lineage allowed this research to identify two strands of calligraphy: information transfer and gestural abstraction of text. While calligraphy began in China, it has evolved throughout millennia to become an art form of the gestural marking of a textual line. Exploring this niche defined the core structure of calligraphy, which renders the traditional East/West cultural divide a moot point because it speaks more in the language of paint—which is essentially the language of gesture and material.

The intention of this research was to determine how drawing from ancient calligraphic practices of body gesture and abstraction, filtered through strict painterly strategies of compression/subtraction/erasure (C/S/E), can rethink traditional forms and take text beyond semantics. This studio-based research challenged calligraphic traditions with a respect for historic conventions, and allowed traditional fundamentals to be summarised in the elemental essence of the calligraphic structure, as follows:

1. the content of abstracted gestural line derived from text
2. the use of a reduced palette
3. the materials of ink and paper
4. the gesture of traditional body/brush
5. revisiting and refining the mark.

Personalising these elements by using my published poems as content, creating book-ash ink derived from burning those books (reminiscent of traditional ink-making practice) and using body gesture (ranging from the intimate to the full-

bodied) created a systematic, theoretical process that further highlighted the experimental results of the painterly strategies (C/S/E). Keeping these fundamentals stable affected the other fundamentals of palette, gesture and material, with series presentation illustrating the fifth fundamental. Studio experiments conflated these fundamental elements with the strategies of C/S/E as processing parameters, and ultimately resulted in a body of works collectively titled *The Continuing Ellipse*.

Within the installation are thoughtful iterations and material reincarnations. I view this as a poetic process that crosses cultural boundaries and initiates an intimate poetic dialogue through individual gestural and material incantations. This process was derived and defined from ancient methodology, was tested through materiality and gesture, and ultimately created a procedural structure that can be altered through the strategies (C/S/E). Restoring and revitalising ancient calligraphic traditions through re-presentation in contemporary practice illustrated the key finding that there is a structural difference between calligraphy as a methodology, as opposed to calligraphy as a style. This is because calligraphy gains its form from the line derived from text, rather than pure expression alone. Incorporating the skeletal underpinnings of calligraphy as a methodology, while extending material and gesture beyond strict adherence to traditional materials alone, creates a point of difference to this continuum.

Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material, which has been accepted, for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgment is made in the text.

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Contents

Abstract.....	i
Statement of Originality	iii
Statement of Authority to Access	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Contents	vi
List of Figures.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 The Project.....	1
1.2 Research Aims	1
1.3 Themes.....	2
1.4 Key Questions.....	3
Chapter 2: Context.....	4
2.1 The Ancient Benchmark	4
2.2 Definition	11
2.3 Reinterpreting Calligraphy	13
2.3.1 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Style.....	14
2.3.1.1 <i>Brice Marden (b. 1938)</i>	15
2.3.2 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Method.....	17
2.3.2.1 <i>Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969)</i>	17
2.3.3 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Ecriture	19
2.4 Deconstructing Tradition: Five Fundamentals	20
2.4.1 Fundamental 1: Content.....	21
2.4.1.1 <i>Beyond Semantics</i>	22
2.4.1.2 <i>Xu Bing (b. 1955)</i>	23
2.4.2 Fundamental 2: Palette.....	24
2.4.2.1 <i>Fung Mingchip (b. 1951)</i>	25
2.4.3 Fundamental 3: Material.....	27
2.4.4 Fundamental 4: Gesture	28
2.4.5 Fundamental 5: Revisiting and Refining	30
Chapter 3: Methodology	31
3.1 Resolving the Elements	31
3.1.1 The Process	31
3.2 The Strategies: Compression/Subtraction/Erasure	35
3.2.1 Compression	37
3.2.1.1 <i>Source-Book Oracle</i>	37
3.2.1.2 <i>Ash Book-Marks</i>	38
3.2.2 Subtraction	39
3.2.2.1 <i>Poem Paintings</i>	40
3.2.3 Erasure	41
3.2.3.1 <i>Untrammelled Vertical—Brushed Lines</i>	42
3.2.3.2 <i>Untrammelled Horizontal Full-body Line</i>	45
3.2.3.3 <i>Full Stop</i>	48
3.3 Installation of <i>The Continuing Ellipse</i>	49

Chapter 4: Conclusion	51
References.....	58
Appendix A: Selected Poems from <i>Bloodshot</i>	63

List of Figures

Figure 1: Wang Xizhi, <i>Preface to Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion</i> , 353	4
Figure 2: Muso Soseki, <i>No Spiritual Meaning</i> (Date Unknown)	6
Figure 3: Yamaoka Tesshu, <i>Dragon and Tiger</i> , 1880	7
Figure 4: Nankoku Hidai, <i>Untitled</i> (Date Unknown)	8
Figure 5: Wang Dongling, <i>The High Music</i> , 2013	9
Figure 6: Han Shan, A Poem from <i>Collected Songs from Cold Mountain</i>	15
Figure 7: Brice Marden, <i>Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)</i> , 1989 to 1990.....	16
Figure 8: Qiu Zhijie, <i>Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times</i> , 1990 to 1995.....	17
Figure 9: Qiu Zhijie, <i>Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times</i> , 1990 to 1995.....	18
Figure 10: Xu Bing, Installation View of <i>Book From The Sky</i> , 1991.....	23
Figure 11: Fung Mingchip, <i>Heart Sutra</i> , 2001	26
Figure 12: Jackson Pollock Painting.....	31
Figure 13: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Palette Experiments</i> , 2014.....	33
Figure 14: Stephen Woodbury, (from left): <i>Red Poems, Shed Poems, Dead Poems and Bloodshot</i> , 2014.....	36
Figure 15: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Bloodshot Source-Book</i> , 2014 to 2015	37
Figure 16: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Ash Book-Marks</i> , 2014 to 2015	39
Figure 17: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Poem Paintings (Four Bloodshot Panels)</i> , 2015	41
Figure 18: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Untrammelled Verticals</i> (from left: one, four, 16, eight, two), 2015	44
Figure 19: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Untrammelled Horizontal</i> , 2015	48
Figure 20: Stephen Woodbury, <i>Full Stop</i> , 2014 to 2015	49
Figure 21: Stephen Woodbury, Installation View of <i>The Continuing Ellipse</i> , 2015	50

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Project

This project resides within the long historical painterly tradition of calligraphy, in which calligraphic mark-making has evolved from literal, fully formed Chinese characters to open, flowing, Zen-inspired abstracted lines derived from text. Through this progression, the gesture has become more important than the literal rendering of text. Calligraphy itself is ‘a continually evolving tradition’ (Sheng 2010, p. 16) that has constantly reinvented itself through centuries of political and spiritual fluctuation, while retaining its core values. To further extend this evolution, this research seeks to determine how ancient calligraphic gestural traditions can be reinterpreted and re-presented through the strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure for a contemporary painting practice.

1.2 Research Aims

The key aim of this research was to build on and extend the 3,500-year progression of calligraphy towards gestural abstracted form by freeing text from its literal meaning. The intention was to determine the core elements of gestural calligraphy that could become parameters to enable a narrow and deliberate testing of ideas and process. This research sought to determine how drawing from ancient calligraphic practices of body gesture and abstraction, filtered through strict painterly strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure (C/S/E), could rethink traditional forms.

Decisions about which content, palette, material and gesture to use can be viewed as the four fundamental elements of calligraphy, with the revisiting and refining of these marks being a fifth. Determining the characteristics of these elements allows a contemporary painting process to evolve, while remaining true to tradition, and delineates calligraphy from other forms of painting. That is, clearly defining these calligraphic elements demarcates the boundaries between calligraphy and gestural abstract painting.

Further, combining these fundamental elements with the self-imposed procedural strategies (C/S/E) can create a niched process derived from the traditions of calligraphy, re-presented in a new way. Defining and containing this research within these strict parameters (C/S/E) creates an under-researched combination of elements to allow a new fusion to be tested in studio practice. Limiting the painting elements to the fundamental underpinnings of the structure of calligraphy allows testing of ancient traditions within a contemporary painting practice.

1.3 Themes

Traditionally, ancient calligraphers meditated on the subject, **subtracted** detail to form an abstraction of that subject, and **compressed** the abstracted essence of their subject and themselves into a gestural mark. This gesture was traditionally performed in one breath, with brush and ink producing a unique gestural mark that **erased** the original, literal meaning (Sato 2013). Given that compression, subtraction and erasure form the basis of both abstraction and calligraphy, through using these strategies as parameters, I see this project as extending the calligraphic lineage of marking the abstracted gestural line derived from text, where semantics are removed.

The use of text is the content of calligraphy and characterises the first fundamental of this project. I considered many different textual vehicles for the form of the abstracted mark. Ideas as diverse as shopping lists, porn scripts, celebrity tweets, horoscope readings, headlines, weather reports and security briefings were among the considerations. However, just as calligraphers used their own poems as the basis of their gestural form, I decided to remain true to this tradition and include text from one of my published poetry books, *Bloodshot*. Also reminiscent of the traditional method of making ink from pine soot was my decision to make ink from burning my poetry book. This informed not only the second fundamental of palette, but also the third fundamental of material, and subsequently the fourth fundamental of gesture.

The desire to retain tradition was a key theme of this research, whereby the traditional methodology provided a stepping-off point to add a nuanced version or progression of this lineage by including my contemporary view of ancient process.

1.4 Key Questions

The research intention was to define and refine a contemporary process that is built on tradition, in which the materials and gestures may vary, yet remain within the characteristics that define the fundamentals. The project's contribution to this field was to determine what occurs at the collision point where the process of creating a mark and materiality can offer various combinations of completeness, meaning and abstraction.

Taking the core fundamental elements of calligraphy (content, palette, material and gesture), processed through the painterly strategies (C/S/E), created a scaffold to enable the structuring of a new contemporary methodology. Consequently, there were two key questions for this research:

1. How can text-based information be transformed through the painting strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure?
2. What is the nature of the change of information from the written word versus its abstracted equivalent in the painting world?

Chapter 2: Context

2.1 The Ancient Benchmark

The evolution of calligraphy has produced the two strands of information transfer and gestural abstraction of text, thereby creating different uses of text in this enduring tradition. This research took the most ancient calligraphy of Wang Xizhi (303 to 361) as the benchmark for this project. After the T'ang Dynasty Emperor, Taizong (circa 649), commanded that Xizhi's original version of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (circa 353) be buried with him (Mackenzie 2013), it became 'enshrined as the ultimate model of running cursive script that every aspiring calligrapher has copied' (Hearn 2013, p. 52). Xizhi's emperor-approved standard shows one use of text, with literal, fully formed characters created with a hand/wrist gesture. It also offers a formal structure of what the modernists of the 1950s would consider 'the grid'.

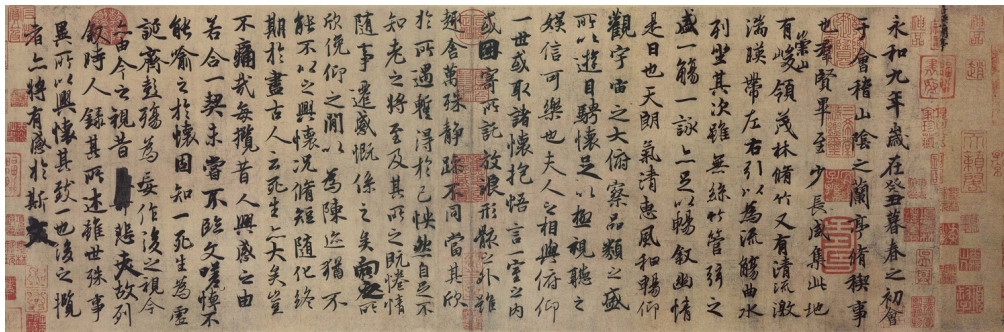


Figure 1: Wang Xizhi, *Preface to Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*, 353

Wang Xizhi (303 to 361), China

Ink on paper (dimensions unknown)

Photograph, viewed 10 March 2015

<<http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/calligraphy-wang-xizhi-orchid.php>>

During the T'ang Dynasty (618 to 906) advances in painting occurred through a conscious effort to combine calligraphic and landscape painting traditions (Powers 2013). The unclassifiable or 'untrammelled' artists of this Dynasty used experimental body gesture to take abstraction into new areas. These approaches

preceded similar techniques ‘developed’ or rediscovered by ‘Action Painters’ (Rosenberg 1952), such as Jackson Pollock. This was a key moment in calligraphic development because abstraction and gesture began to play a greater role than information transfer. The influence of calligraphy on contemporary art can be seen in the parallels between the T’ang Dynasty ‘untrammelled’ artists and mid-twentieth century ‘Action Painters’, which shaped much modern art (Uyehara 1992). Here, ‘art that advances discovery rather than retraces the known has been given priority in modernism’ (Garrels 2005, p. 13) and has been a constant in calligraphy for millennia. Abstract painting in which the material gesture becomes the subject is analogous to calligraphers’ gestural mark-making, thus ‘[bringing modern art] into accord with that of the far east’ (Sullivan, cited in Lachman 1992, p. 507).

Around the eleventh century (Song Dynasty, 960 to 1279), a group of amateurs, known as the ‘Literati’, furthered the Expressionist aspects of calligraphy by favouring the reduced palette gestural brushstroke over the literal rendering of characters (Powers 2013). More importance was placed on the brushstroke because it was seen as ‘autographic, revealing the personality of each artist’ (Yu-Ho Ecke 1971, Introduction), with each gestural line an embodiment of the artist’s individuality (Hearn 2013). Chinese characters were the basis of calligraphy and the beautiful writing of these characters has traditionally been highly valued in artistic terms (Hearn 2013; Nakata 1973; Sato 2013; Uyehara 1992).

Japanese calligraphy, known as *Shodo*, furthered this process and moved away from Chinese characters (Uyehara 1992) in favour of the freer-flowing, Zen-inspired abstracted textual line. Calligraphy was seen as a catalyst towards enlightenment because it expressed the spirit or essence of the calligrapher (Sogen & Katsujo 1983). Poetry is often the subject (Earnshaw 1989); however, the calligraphy itself is both artefact and author (VAM 2008). Exemplar artists such as Muso Soseki (1275 to 1351) demonstrated a second use of text, whereby abbreviated text was employed as a signifier of other poems or literature, designed to encourage internal reflection and curiosity of learning. Artists such as Soseki began to continually revisit earlier work and refine their mark towards a Zen-inspired perfection. Gesture moved from the hand and wrist gestures of Xizhi to a

freer arm movement. *No Spiritual Meaning* (date unknown) is an exemplar of text as a signifier. It can also be read as a gestural artefact in its own right, and is an excellent example of how text and gesture can coexist. Further, Soseki's line subtracts detail and erases the original meaning of the characters by compressing the information into an abstracted gestural mark.



Figure 2: Muso Soseki, *No Spiritual Meaning* (Date Unknown)

Muso Soseki (1275 to 1351), Japan

Ink on paper (dimensions unknown)

Photograph, Wikipedia, viewed 2 March 2013

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muso_Soseki_3.jpg>

Japan's four-hundred-year isolation that ended with the Edo period (1603 to 1867) (Britannica 2015) allowed *Shodo* to develop along its own trajectory. Favour was given to the abstracted line derived from text-based forms. Samurai artists such as Yamaoka Tesshu (1836 to 1888) incorporated classical texts, poetry (his and others) and more abstracted gestural markings. His body gesture is typified in *Tiger and Dragon* (1880), which indicates sword skill, as reflected in his deft

handling of brush and ink, with strong, refined strokes indicating his powerful physique (Sogen & Katsujo 1983). He studied in the style of Wang Xizhi (VAM 2008) and provided a wealth of techniques and content, which used both character-based and gestural abstraction. Tesshu continually refined his earlier mark (VAM), and proves an exemplar link between Soseki's character-based line from the Middle Ages and the full-body gestural abstraction of the mid-twentieth century. Tesshu's *Tiger and Dragon* exemplifies the third use of text, as abstracted mark derived from text.



Figure 3: Yamaoka Tesshu, *Dragon and Tiger*, 1880

Yamaoka Tesshu (1836 to 1888), Japan

Ink on paper, height 135 cm

Photograph, Victoria and Albert Museum, © Hitsuzendo

Viewed 3 March 2013

<<http://vam.ac.uk/content/articles/z/zen-calligraphy/>>

Nankoku Hidai (1912 to 1999) is considered ‘the Father of contemporary calligraphy in Japan’ (BTAP 2012) and was a pioneer of Japanese avant-garde calligraphy (Uyehara 1992). These avant-garde artists experimented with non-

traditional materials, such as oil, concrete, swords and tyres, and with purely abstract marking techniques. However, they returned to the written word as the basis of form because ‘the constitution of calligraphy lies in the pure abstraction derived from lines’ (Hariu, cited in Uyehara 1992, p. 38). Hidai began experimenting with non-traditional gesture and materials and was a pivotal link from Tesshu and the Zen calligraphers through to post-World War II (WWII) abstraction. This evolution of the line from fully formed to gestural body mark was further absorbed into and influenced post-WWII abstraction (Uyehara 1992), which is currently being reabsorbed by contemporary Ink Artists in China.



Figure 4: Nankoku Hidai, *Untitled* (Date Unknown)

Nankoku Hidai (1912 to 1999), Japan

Ink on paper (dimensions unknown)

Viewed 3 March 2014

<<http://www.tokyo-gallery.com/en/exhibitions/intokyo/post-83.html>>

Wang Dongling (b. 1945) is a contemporary artist absorbing Western abstraction. He was included in the *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013. Dongling is a giant in the current ink art movement and, whether by chance or design, has begun creating similar marks to the mid-twentieth century Expressionists, where the brushstroke is essentially the subject. As a trained calligrapher, he works between all three modes of text (literal, signifier and abstraction) to produce a working method that aligns with earlier gestural calligraphers, such as Teshu. Subtracting detail through a scaled-up, oversized body gesture erases linguistic meaning and opens the work to viewer interpretation. These elements offer ways to incorporate a contrasted, ‘untrammelled’ expressive gesture, using a traditional palette and materials in contemporary practice. Dongling’s expressive brushstroke is the subject that unites each subsequent painting and adds power to the overall series of work.



Figure 5: Wang Dongling, *The High Music*, 2013

Wang Dongling (b. 1945), China

Ink on paper, 124 x 248 cm

Viewed 12 January 2015

<<http://www.inkstudio.com.cn/zh/exhibitions/10/works/artworks527/>>

Many of the current Chinese Ink Artists were born during or experienced the Cultural Revolution, which restricted their geographic and philosophical

possibilities. Since the mid-1980s, many of these artists have used their recent freedom to travel or live abroad, allowing them to blend calligraphic traditions and Western influences from the mid-twentieth century (Hearn 2013; Sheng 2010). I too absorb these influences by researching traditional calligraphy, combined with my own experiences, to re-present calligraphy through the prism of an Australian-born artist with a great affinity for calligraphy and abstract painting.

While calligraphy has a complex, often divergent history, it evolved cyclically by moving away from and re-absorbing fixed traditions, which aligns with a key concept in Kirk Varnedoe's (2006) book, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, which states that there is no neat, straight-line 'baton change' in the history of abstract art. Rather, there is an evolving ellipse in which artists input their unique view, and art continually recycles the past to re-present a refined future. Varnedoe's Mellon Lectures delivered just before his death were incorporated into the book *Pictures of Nothing*, and can be viewed as the culmination of his life's work. As an art historian and head curator at the Museum of Modern Art for many years, he wished to respond to Ernst Gombrich's seminal lecture of the 1950s, *Art and Illusion*, which presented a powerful argument about why illusionistic representational art was important. Varnedoe wished to establish an argument as compelling for abstraction as Gombrich had for representation. He concluded that his viewpoint differed to that of Gombrich. Given that abstraction is a key ingredient in calligraphy, Varnedoe's position is reinforced by my research. Representation can be considered a search for the familiar and known, whereas abstraction takes a leap of faith into the unknown experience, in which the surface, material and gesture become the subject. As Varnedoe's ellipse is not a straight-line progression this allows any point in history to be the origin of a methodological progression that creates new outcomes within that continuum.

This project looks backwards to absorb methodologies and analyse artists with similarities and techniques that encompass and extend ancient calligraphic traditions. Given that abstraction is the basis of the gestural calligraphic lineage, this project pays particular attention to methods of abstraction of text-based forms, as implemented in artistic practice from different eras.

The true calligraphic artist is one who knows how to absorb the tradition without being enslaved by it (Yu-Ho Ecke 1971, Introduction).

As Eastern artists are now absorbing Western artistic abstract traditions, the boundary between cultures is becoming more porous, and contemporary art is generally moving beyond the East/West dichotomy. By taking the structural underpinnings of the calligraphic tradition, this project removes cultural influences in order to focus on abstracting and gesturally marking the line derived from text. Like many contemporary Ink Artists, I view this research as being beyond any cultural divide (Hearn 2013).

2.2 Definition

Calligraphy has an etymology derived from Greek, meaning ‘to write beautifully’ (Oxford Dictionary 2015). The Chinese call it ‘*shu fa*’, meaning ‘the system or method of writing’ (Yu-Ho Ecke 1971, Foreword), whereas in Japan it is known as ‘*Shodo*’—‘the way of writing’ (Nakata 1973, p. 9). Calligraphy is a verb describing an action or process, and is often perceived as the writing of a line resembling Chinese or Japanese characters (Hauptman 2005, p. 22).

Laurence Binyon’s *Painting in the Far East* (1908) was influenced by earlier Chinese art critics and supports the ideal of the calligraphic brushstroke made in traditional materials. Roger Fry’s 1910 review of Binyon’s article set the foundations for ‘an early manifesto of modernism’ (Powers 2013, p. 319), in which he discussed Western art as being burdened by the ‘cumbrous machinery of merely curious representation’, and hoped that ‘our art’ would ‘seek to portray only the essential elements of things’ as in Eastern art (Powers 2013, p. 319). Fry introduced ‘calligraphic’ in a modernist sense in 1918 in his essay ‘Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art’, in which he linked the rhythmic quality of the line to Henri Matisse, and illustrated the fact that the calligraphic line is not mechanical and ‘is capable of infinite variation’ (Powers 2013, p. 322), offering new possibilities for modernist art. Through the mid-twentieth century, this

‘essential element’ continually moved further away from literal representations, which had been a cornerstone of calligraphy for centuries.

The abstraction of language, in the written form of text, combined with the materials of more personalised marking, is the foundation of calligraphy. The gestural line derived from text actually frees gesture from expression alone, so that the line of ‘writing appears ... as the very surplus of its own function’ (Barthes, cited in Hauptman 2005, p. 22). While the brush mark can be formed to adhere to semantics, it can also be seen as a record of the individual artist’s touch (Hearn 2013) and therefore allows unique and almost infinitely variable marking of an abstracted line. Capturing the essence of this expressive abstract mark is the focus of calligraphers, and intersects mid-twentieth-century gestural concerns.

Clement Greenberg forged forwards in the modernist vein from the 1940s, springboarding from Fry’s ideas (Powers 2013). Widely regarded as the pre-eminent critic of modernism and pure formalist abstraction in the mid-twentieth century, much of Greenberg’s writing at the time was hugely influential. Championing a range of artists who painted with the ‘essentials’ of painting, he created and then worked within a critical structure that arguably limited his point of view. The passage of time has largely discredited his viewpoint, as much of the twentieth century’s art fails to fit within his perspective. Yve-Alain Bois (1996) argued against Greenberg’s ‘mortgage on formalism’ by demonstrating that Greenberg was ‘prescribing rather than describing’ and ‘made unbelievable mistakes at the level of description of material’ (de Almeida 2005, para. 35). Bois suggested that Greenberg ‘was not interested whatsoever in the process, in the actual material of the works of art’ (de Almeida 2005, para. 35). Bois considered this a mistake and elevated the importance of medium. This is illustrated with two examples—Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock—in which Greenberg dismissed the importance of material to an artist’s practice and process. This shows that, ultimately, the critic and artist may be at cross purposes. Given that abstract art requires subjective interpretation, a critique is often one association or interpretation that may prove very limited. The medium may actually prove a key ingredient in an artwork’s process and content, which may require a first-hand experience to decipher, rather than a dogmatic cursory glance.

Just as Bois extended Greenberg's position, contemporary artists extend traditional calligraphers' methodologies. Focussing on the methodologies allows tradition to remain the spine structuring this research. Calligraphy has evolved to include gestural abstraction, which ellipses back to the untrammelled tradition. Greenberg's modernism may or may not have come and gone; however, artists are still dealing with the same concerns they have for millennia. Gesture, material and text derived from literature and poems can be content. From the untrammelled artists, circa 700 AD, through to post-Greenberg modernism, material remains a key content in abstract painting and calligraphy.

Abstraction has increasingly become a key ingredient for artistic practice, to the extent that artwork such as Cy Twombly's use of scratchy scribbles, Jose Parla's mesh of line and Oscar Murillo's inclusion of letters are often considered 'calligraphic'. These artists' 'calligraphic' markings may seem the same; however, further exploration reveals significant differences in the style of these markings and the methodology behind them. Not every artistic work that includes a letter or two is necessarily 'calligraphy' and, conversely, not every work of calligraphy has a legible letter in it. Calligraphy is the process of 'doing'—the creation of an essential, abstracted mark derived from the textual line.

2.3 Reinterpreting Calligraphy

Calligraphy 'significantly influenced the gestural tendency in modern American painting' (Clarke 1993, p. 19) and, whether directly or indirectly, the Action Painters and Abstract Expressionists proved a key link in the lineage from the ancient to the newer generations of painters currently working. Abstract Expressionists such as Robert Motherwell were deeply influenced by Oriental calligraphy (Caws 2003). However, links from the ancient traditions to the Expressionists probably began with Mark Tobey and his calligraphic-inspired paintings (Clarke 1993, p. 19).

While Franz Klein's architecturally structured, reduced palette of black on white is often credited with being influenced by calligraphy, in reality, his work's comparison to Oriental calligraphy was something he continually fought against and was frustrated by (Gaugh 1985). This highlights the fact that, despite the protestations of the artist, critics can view artists' work by looking at the style, rather than considering the methodology.

The *Forever Now* exhibition in 2015 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was curated around the idea of 'atemporal' artists, and addressed the current discussion regarding authenticity and tradition in painting. 'Atemporality' describes 'the new and strange state of the world where the internet has seemingly allowed all eras to exist at once' (Hoptman 2014, p. 13). The atemporal artist scans across time to select what is needed, thereby resurrecting ideas, motifs and styles (Hoptman 2014). This takes a somewhat rhizomic, horizontal scan through styles of different eras. However, it could be argued that style tends to skim across the surface of tradition. This research aimed to discover the possibilities by using calligraphy as a methodology to generate new outcomes, rather than a style to be replicated.

The process of taking the fundamentals, filtered through the strategies, uses the abstracted line derived from text as the foundation of the artwork. It eliminates the need for semantics and prerequisite cultural understandings of language to fully interpret the end results. This methodology renders East/West cultural aspects as a moot point because the focus is on the universally available elements of gesture, materiality and line. Therefore, this project takes an 'acultural' viewpoint by researching the very deep, core structure of calligraphy that started in China, but has evolved beyond that specific methodology.

2.3.1 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Style

The differences between calligraphy as a style and methodology can be seen by contrasting the work of Brice Marden and Qiu Zhijie. Both directly reinterpret ancient calligraphy and re-present it in their contemporary practice.

2.3.1.1 Brice Marden (b. 1938)

Marden began as a Minimalist after the peak of Abstract Expressionism, and feared a ‘creative death’ if he continued his grey monochromes (Costello 2013). After attending a Japanese calligraphy exhibition, he began to incorporate the line into his work. Researching the source of calligraphy led him to the Chinese traditions and ancient poets, such as Han Shan of the eighth or ninth century (Costello 2013; Richardson 1999).

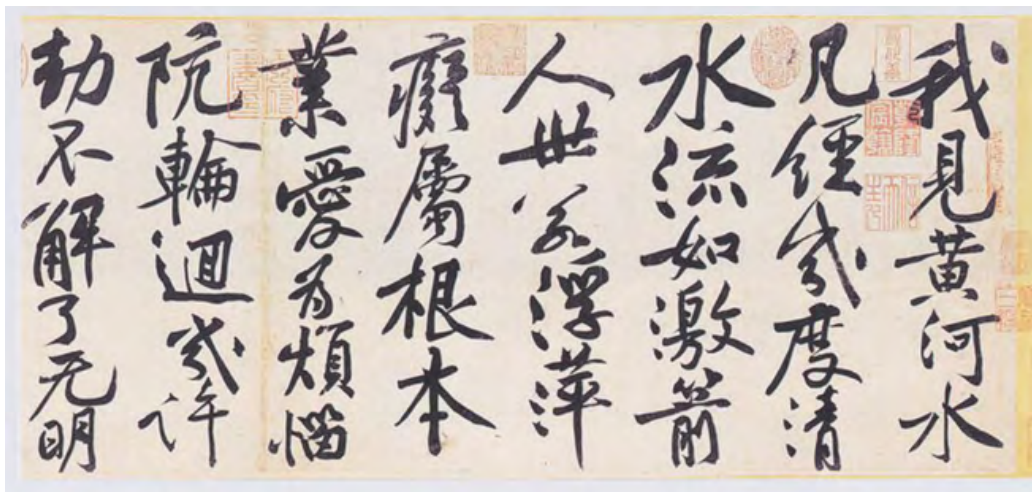


Figure 6: Han Shan, A Poem from *Collected Songs from Cold Mountain*

Han Shan, T'ang Dynasty (eighth or ninth century), China

Ink on paper (dimensions unknown)

Image scanned 1 May 2013

Costello (2013, p. 113)

Marden began incorporating abstractions taken from traditional texts in ink on paper. However, as a Western artist who cannot read Chinese, incorporating a mix of gestural lines derived from Chinese characters that are illegible to the artist becomes an abstraction of an abstraction. He began to include the abstracted shapes, or ‘glyphs’, through various incantations, and arrived at his acclaimed *Cold Mountain* series (1988 to 1991). Marden stated that ‘the way I get there is visual’ (Richardson 1999, p. 91). This highlights his process, in which he took the visible traditional structure of Han Shan’s poems (five characters per column and four couplets, or eight rows) and further subtracted detail in order to further erase

the initial meaning from these original characters. He also subtracted and erased material on the surface, thereby resulting in new forms.



Figure 7: Brice Marden, *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, 1989 to 1990

Brice Marden (b. 1938) Bronxville, United States

Oil on linen, 274.3 x 365.8 cm

Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Image scanned 1 May 2013

Costello (2013, p. 113)

Marden's process is a key example of reinterpreting ancient content and representing in a contemporary painting practice. While Marden intellectually knows Han Shan's poems are text, he can only see the forms of the characters. Therefore, he abstracts the abstracted lines that are already beyond semantics. Given that 'Marden never simulated calligraphy in his work' (Richardson 1999, p. 91), he is stylistically forming glyphs, rather than using calligraphy as a methodology.

2.3.2 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Method

2.3.2.1 Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969)

Qiu Zhijie is a contemporary ink artist using traditional materials and content. His meditative process can be examined in *Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times* (1990 to 1995). The Orchid Pavilion text is a group of poems written in 353 AD by Wang Xizhi that is still copied through repetition by budding calligraphers today (Hearn 2013).

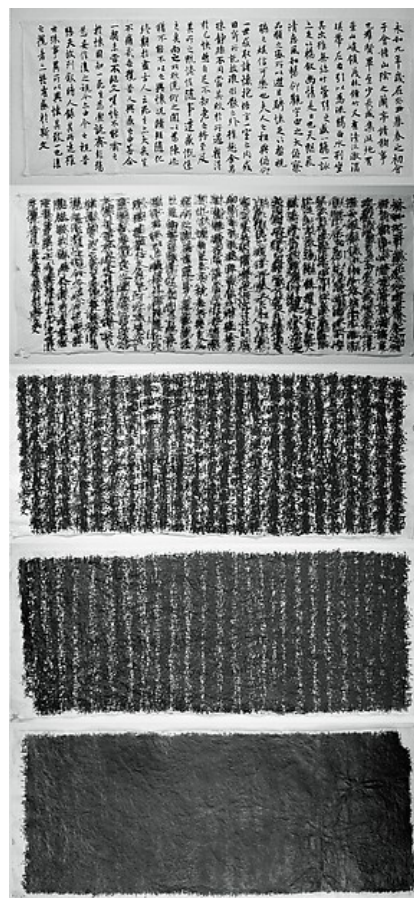


Figure 8: Qiu Zhijie, *Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times*, 1990 to 1995

Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969), China

Five chromogenic prints, variable media, each: 19 1/4 × 29 in. (48.9 × 73.7 cm)

Lent by M + Sigg Collection, Hong Kong; rights and reproduction: © Qiu Zhijie

Viewed 12 June 2015

<<http://metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7B2CCA0D85-6307-4AC7-9674-C4E4F675C08E%7D&oid=77606>>

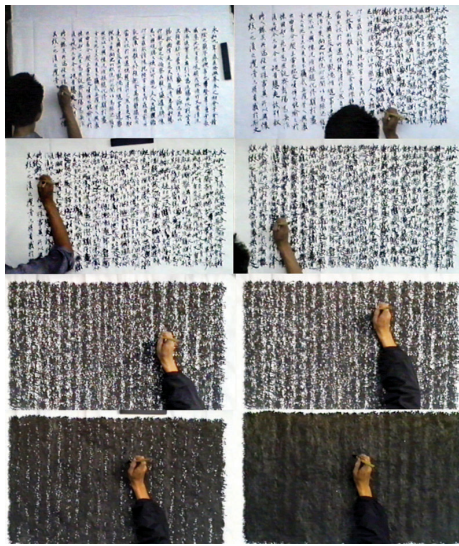


Figure 9: Qiu Zhijie, *Writing the ‘Orchid Pavilion Preface’ One Thousand Times, 1990 to 1995*

Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969), China

Viewed 7 July 2015 <<http://www.qiuzhijie.com/worksleibie/calligraphy/1990-1995%20langtingxu/video.jpg>>

Qiu paints with ink on paper, structuring the poem in Wang Xizhi classic style. Handwritten characters are over-painted, with each successive rendering consuming the last. This repetitive process ultimately eliminates expressive gesture as the imperfect artist’s touch combines the cumulative gestures of the individual characters into a new unique form. This new abstraction evolves as the text is compressed into a worked black monochrome surface that highlights materiality. Qiu erases the literal meaning of the text, thus freeing text from semantics, and ultimately making the subject the ink itself. This not only reinforces studio experimentation, but also encourages the idea of including a repetitive process to abstract text and remove semantics.

Qiu’s meditative process is reminiscent of Marden’s use of Han Shan’s poem; however, Qiu employs tradition as a methodology, rather than a style. He bases his process on the rendering of text, rather than an approximate interpretation of nonsensical forms. Qiu’s repetitive gestural writing of a text evolves to ‘abstraction in its toughest form: the monochrome’ (Krauss 2012a, p. 24) and offers an insightful technique of how to include text, freed from semantics. His

method allows the medium and process to become the subject. The compression of material and content, through the subtraction of detail, erases the original literal purpose of the *Orchid Pavilion*. Further, this artwork encourages an inclusion of a monochrome palette, traditional materials and content, and illustrates how this may be combined with a repetitive, meditative process.

2.3.3 Reinterpreting Calligraphy as Ecriture

The exhibition *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture* exhibited work from the Daros collection in 1999, and placed dominant gestural artists from post-WWII through to the new millennium. The exhibition's focus was on direct expression of or conceptual interest in gestural and/or calligraphic abstraction (Fischer 1999). Fischer's (1999, p. 11) accompanying text reviewed a selection of disparate artists that, at first glance, may seem at odds to each other because they range from different and seemingly contradictory post-WWII movements (such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop Art and Postmodern painting), and examines them 'side by side rather than in succession'. Similarly, the current research worked across artistic movements and viewed artists through the prism of calligraphy to gain insight to their methodologies. Looking at the similarities within this strand enabled surprising discoveries.

Gesture here is taken as movement or 'a physical action' (Fischer 1999, p. 19), which, for most of the Daros artists, is on a large scale in which the body movement is evident in the picture. Fischer introduced an interesting term of 'écriture', which is taken from French and has advantages over the English translation of 'writing'. Ecriture refers to a smaller, more intimate scaled gesture relating to types of writing:

- as a system of notation and thought using conventional graphic signs
- as a form of represented signs used for representation
- as the personal manner in which these signs are written, such as one's handwriting
- as the intellectual and physical act of writing (Fischer 1999, p. 20).

This term is useful for describing more precisely what calligraphy is. Traditionally, calligraphy is viewed as a cross between writing and painting as an expression of individuality, emotion and spontaneity (Fischer 1999). As calligraphy and *écriture* revolve more around the gestural marking process, they are not dependent on linguistic literalities or semantics. If the artist knows what he or she is writing, then it is *écriture*, even if it cannot be deciphered. This ‘intellectual and physical act of writing’ further highlights the style of Marden because he is not writing text; instead, he is reproducing, what appears to him, abstracted forms.

Procedural synergies between contemporary and ancient artists’ methodologies become more obvious by including *écriture* as a definition, as opposed to ‘writing’. Cy Twombly’s *écriture* has more in common with Robert Ryman’s *écriture* and both are closer to ancient calligraphers than first impressions may suggest. Testing and encouraging connections, while keeping to the structural core or fundamentals of calligraphy, offers a structure on which to expand. Just as artists such as Robert Ryman limited their formal painting elements to create infinite variations within that process structure, for thousands of years, calligraphers have been adding their unique input to an enduring and diverse tradition. The methodologies may result in apparently different marking techniques; however, the core structures of that tradition remain as parameters to work within. Whether intimate *écriture* or full-bodied gesture, calligraphy is an action-based process resulting in a visible mark derived from text.

2.4 Deconstructing Tradition: Five Fundamentals

Creating a painting requires the manipulation of matter and subsequent decisions regarding which content, palette, material and gesture to use. With the invention of the brush, ink and paper, calligraphic gesture moved from hieroglyphic-like carved forms into oracle bone and bamboo, to a freer-flowing composition. Historically, the basis and beauty of calligraphy is in the line (Otei, cited in Earnshaw 1989; Sogen & Katsujo 1983) and ‘the essence of calligraphy is the single stroke’ (Sogen & Katsujo 1983, p. 10) done in one breath with no

corrections (Sato 2013). Progressively, abstracted gestural marking with a brush by the artist was considered more important than strict adherence to technically correct literal rendering of letters (Mackenzie 2013). This progression towards text-based abstracted line, separated from semantics, has been occurring in different forms for millennia.

Whether separated by decades or millennia, the ‘old historicizes the new, while the new offers a fresh interpretation of the old’ (Sheng 2010, p. 12). Challenging calligraphic and contemporary gestural abstract traditions with a respect for historic conventions allows traditional fundamentals to be summarised in the elemental essence of its structure, which includes:

1. the content of abstracted gestural line derived from text
2. using a reduced palette
3. the materials of ink and paper
4. the gesture of traditional body/brush
5. revisiting and refining the mark.

I utilised these guiding elements to combine with the painterly strategies of compression/subtraction/erasure derived from those elements, then distilled and procedurally galvanised them to create artwork. Researching and viewing artists through their similarities and links with calligraphy and gestural abstraction uncovered new information.

2.4.1 Fundamental 1: Content

The progressive merger of the information and gestural abstraction aspects of calligraphy ultimately means that it ‘is not the meaning of the character, but the writing—the moment of execution and the action itself—that is important’ (Yu-Ho Ecke 1971, Introduction). Traditionally, classic poetry and literature were used as the subject, which evolved through gestural abstraction to reveal material, gesture and composition as ‘the real subject’ (Hearn 2013, p. 35). In this case, content is the temporal capture of gesture in material. This gestural focus still requires a basis in form, otherwise it moves into the realm of pure Abstract Expressionism and away from calligraphy as a methodology. Keeping the subject of calligraphy as literature and poetry provides form from which to derive gesture.

Unlike pure Expressionist abstraction, calligraphic abstraction lies in the structural processing of form derived from text. The basis of text is the line. The line, applied by the brush, emerges from the ink delivered to the traditional substrate of silk or paper. Over time, the literal text was replaced by the expressive abstraction of that line. While the initial basis of calligraphy involves textual semantics, it can also be evaluated in terms of ‘composition, figure-ground relationships, gesture and kinesthetic movement’ (Hearn 2013, p. 139), which intersects with the same areas of interest as post-WWII abstraction. This also reinforces Varnedoe’s (2006, p. 8) idea that the reward from this type of art comes from the fact that the ‘less there is to look at, the more important it is that we look at it closely and carefully’.

The proposition is that gesture that occurs over a period can be held, compressed and sustained as a unique visual moment in painting. An astute viewer can vicariously reconstruct this process and ‘read the painting as a record of its own creation ... sometimes hundreds of years after it happened’ (Sheng 2010, pp. 18–19). Abstraction for this project can be defined as that beyond any ‘distraction’ (Fischer 1999, p. 13) to representation or illusion. That is, the term ‘abstract’ applies to non-figurative and non-representational gestural marking. The challenge is to combine the information transfer and abstract elements. While text is a presupposition for calligraphy, content can include text in various stages of abstraction.

2.4.1.1 Beyond Semantics

Historically, artists have used many strategies to disrupt legibility and easy understanding, such as re-contextualising, reordering, rewriting and reconfiguring letters to form abstractions derived from text. Broadly, these strategies could be grouped as creating pseudo-characters. As previously discussed, Qiu Zhijie uses an overpainting process that results in the disruption of legibility, whereas Xu Bing constructs his own pseudo-characters.

2.4.1.2 Xu Bing (b. 1955)

Xu Bing has become an art world luminary (Sheng 2010, p. 12) from examining the inherent unreliability of language (Hearn 2013). He creates pseudo-characters to frustrate legibility in response to his conflicting experience of growing in a China with respect for and mistrust of the written word (Hearn 2013). His experience of the damage propaganda could inflict during the Cultural Revolution (Hearn 2013) led to works such as *Book From The Sky* (1987 to 1991), which is a methodology of calligraphy using tradition to further the possibilities of text and abstraction. It also enacts a Chan concept whereby meaning is more effectively transmitted when an idea is communicated through ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ (Liu 2011, p. 125). This equates to the Western concept in which ‘a picture tells a thousand words’, and has been a staple strategy for abstract art, as meaning becomes an experiential decipherment.



Figure 10: Xu Bing, Installation View of *Book From The Sky*, 1991

Xu Bing (b. 1950), China

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Viewed 23 November 2015

<http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1991/book_from_the_sky1

>

In this installation work, Xu activated the various strategies of creating pseudo-characters, derived from Chinese characters, to invent his own text that looks like a rewriting of the known (Hearn 2013; Minglu 2009). He took years to create books in a traditional woodblock printing style of interpretations of a Song Dynasty (960 to 1279) typeface, done in a later Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644) style (Hearn 2013). Each book is 61 to 96 pages, printed in a nine-column format (Hearn 2013). All the volumes are housed under a canopy of scrolls, draped from the ceiling. Each element together morphs into a unified, powerful work that resembles actual characters, yet remains ‘defiantly undecipherable’ (Hearn 2013, p. 43). The combination of each lettering at first sparks recognition, yet closer viewing makes legibility elusive, as each character is an entirely artist-invented mark derived from actual characters (Hearn 2013; Liu 2011; Minglu 2009). The viewer who reads Chinese is denied ‘linguistic engagement’ (Selby 2009b, p. 247) because they are immersed ‘in a sea of imaginary words’ (Hearn 2013, p. 45). The work may have a more powerful effect on Chinese audiences than Western audiences who cannot read Chinese, and therefore do not expect the gratification of learning what the artist has written. To literate Chinese, the recognition of illegibility approaches a surprise realisation and ‘psycholinguistic limbo’ (Vinograd 2011, p. 98), which frustrates literal understanding and requires an experiential decipherment, rather than a cursory recognition of the known.

Representation activates a search for familiar imagery, whereas abstraction moves the interpretation away from looking for the known, towards the unfamiliar experience. It is the difference between rendering and creating. With this type of abstraction of calligraphy, there is a compression of detail and gesture into an essential mark. As detail is subtracted to its essential form, meaning is altered as the original content, or text-based forms are erased. Pseudo-characters move the viewing of an artwork towards an experience, rather than a simple looking.

2.4.2 Fundamental 2: Palette

Over time, the traditional calligraphic palette moved from oracle bone and bamboo colour to become the black and diluted greys of ink, on silk-coloured or white paper ground. As ink is traditionally made by burning pine and capturing

the soot, the shades of ink range through the colours of smoke (Hearn 2013; Sato 2013; Sheng 2010). The current study's studio results included making ink from burning my *Bloodshot* poetry book, in line with traditional techniques of capturing soot and ash. Working with a reduced palette offers many opportunities to remove (subtract and erase) the potential associative distractions of colour to direct the focus towards the internal structure of a work of art. Whether using a monochrome black, such as Pierre Soulages, or the monochrome white of Robert Ryman, the effect of a reduced palette shifts viewer emphasis to the ultimate gestural nuances made in the material used. Every gesture of the brushstroke becomes activated with the slightest shift in light intensity.

Whatever looks luminous does not look grey (Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Batchelor 2014, p. 2).

Following from his book *Chromophobia* (Batchelor 2000), which explores colour relationships in art, David Batchelor (2014) took grey as his subject in *The Luminous and the Grey*. He posited that 'grey is surely the most abundantly used colour in art' (Batchelor 2014, p. 77) and stated that it is primarily present as a line or shading, but absent as colour. However, grey has its own properties and can be used to soften a gestural mark, or highlight and activate any other hue placed with it. Batchelor (2014, p. 64) suggested that 'Grey, you might say, gets bad press' and, like calligraphers from the T'ang Dynasty onwards, found that luminous results are possible with a reduced palette of diluted grey. Contrast can be used to highlight the power and gesture, whereas a diluted grey can soften effects.

2.4.2.1 Fung Mingchip (b. 1951)

Fung Mingchip is a self-taught calligrapher who merges the form of calligraphy with material. His meditative working process moves beyond the characters' literal significance, and ultimately focuses on the transformative process of material and time, in which he creates what he calls 'new scripts' (Hearn 2013, p. 56). His diptych, *Heart Sutra* (2001), uses a full traditional palette range of black, through to almost transparent grey markings on white paper ground.

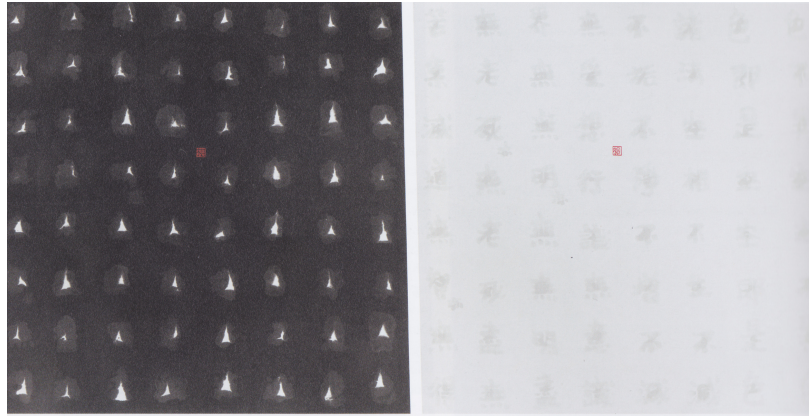


Figure 11: Fung Mingchip, *Heart Sutra*, 2001

Fung Mingchip (b. 1951), China

Ink on paper (each): 26 5/8 × 27 1/2 in. (67.6 × 69.8 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gift of Susan L Beningson and Steve Arons, in memory of Renée Beningson

Image scanned 12 May 2014, Hearn (2013, p.60)

Using text taken from the *Heart Sutra*—a canonical Buddhist text dealing with the ephemeral, impermanent nature of existence—Fung’s process moves the focus from the literal meaning of each character to the material itself. His addition of a small signature seal script in the middle of each panel stamps the artist’s authorship in a vermillion or cinnabar shade of red. Cinnabar began to be used in seal script calligraphy in the Nara Period in Japan (646 to 794) (Nakata 1973, p. 32) and offers a surprising effect contrasted on the greys and blacks. In the current project, I considered including my painting signature in cinnabar; however, this was ultimately rejected in favour of including no signature in order to facilitate focus solely on the individuality of the already personalised lines.

Material considerations become an integral component that directly influences the contrasted or monochrome palette. Fung, Ryman and Soulages employ abstraction and gesture to heighten the painterly aspects of their work, where the medium becomes the subject. Body gesture marks the passage of time and records the temporal construction onto the surface in a medium that becomes both the content and the process, which aligns these artists with the ancient calligraphers’ intent.

2.4.3 Fundamental 3: Material

Material and gesture are intricately linked and largely interdependent. Painting can be conceived as ‘a kind of immersion in materials’, where the paint is ‘a finely tuned antenna’ (Elkins 1998, p. 220) that captures and suspends the artist’s slightest gesture in the material. Throughout the centuries, ‘artists have used ink ... on every conceivable surface’ (Hearn 2013, p. 13) to retain their gestural marks. As new technologies evolved, experimental materials became available. Now, various plastics and human-made materials have become possibilities to use as substrate material, as has acrylic paint for marking. Rosalind Krauss (2012b, para. 36) discussed the medium in her writings and considered that ‘modernism is all about the medium’, whereas ‘post-modernism ... is an attempt to bury the medium’. The collision point between gesture and material is a key area of discovery for the current research, with the choice of material an important consideration directly influencing palette and gesture.

Although calligraphy began as hieroglyphic-like carved pictograms in hard surfaces (Earnshaw, 1989; Hearn 2013; Sato 2014; Sheng 2010; Uyehara 1992), it gradually evolved to use the ‘triad of ink, brush and paper’ (Sheng 2010, p. 17), which have remained the standard materials used to today (Sheng 2010). The invention of the brush allowed great advances in the type of marks an artist could make. The angular carving in hard surfaces was replaced by a freer-flowing and intimate mark provided by fine-pointed animal hair. Shaped as a reservoir to hold ink, the calligraphy brush became an elemental, material delivery tool used to highlight an artist’s unique touch and gesture. Placing ink on an equally nuanced surface allowed great variations in gesture to further isolate an artist’s unique mark.

Silk generally remained the preferred substrate for calligraphers until the thirteenth century, even though paper was invented in China around the second century (Sheng 2010, p. 18). Paper was, and is, pulped from a variety of materials, creating a uniquely receptive material that is still employed by contemporary artists. Each material requires a different type of gesture. For example, ink is generally more fluid than oil paint, paper responds differently to linen, primed

linen responds differently to unprimed linen, ink on linen yields different results to oil on aluminium, and so on. The interaction or collision point between these materials directly influences the type of gesture required. This directly affected the findings of this project's two questions that tested the material and gesture conflation.

The medium used by artists offers numerous avenues for invoking physical compression, subtraction and erasure parameters. For example, Marden's literal subtraction of material through using turpentine-soaked rags also leaves an erased trace in the substrate. Subsequent overpainting compresses the next layers of lines into the layers underneath, and ultimately creates a nuanced surface of compressed additions, subtractions and erasures. The addition or compression of additional material can also obscure layers underneath to erase meaning and subtract form. Qiu Zhijie's *Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times* is a key example of a repetitive process employed with traditional materials. Robert Ryman—famous for painting all-white monochromes on square canvas in oils—employs a similar strategy in a less viscous medium. Contrasting the fluid properties of traditional ink and Western traditional oil paint offers a point of difference for this project.

2.4.4 Fundamental 4: Gesture

Throughout the centuries, calligraphy and painting has fluctuated in line with technological advancements (Myers 2011), resulting in a resurgence and broadening of gesture and material processes, where painting has emerged as 'one of the most dynamic platforms in contemporary art' (Deitch 2012, p. 5). My area of interest aligns with artists such as Robert Ryman (cited in Hudson 2013, p. 54), who believes 'there is never the question of what to paint, only how to paint'.

Famous for his drip paintings (1947 to 1950), Pollock used gravity and body gesture in a manner that eliminated all external references other than the act itself. Pollock's innovative paintings abstracted and reduced painting to the core elements of the medium and its application—the body gesture. However, over 1,000 years earlier, the untrammelled gestural processes were already similar

precursors to Pollock, and were subsequently absorbed into the Literati tradition, which later influenced the Zen-inspired Sho artists. All favoured the brushstroke and physicality of the artist's gestural mark.

T'ang eccentrics ... practiced techniques every bit as outlandish as those of the New York Action Painters of the 1950's and 1960's (Sullivan 1979, pp. 54–55).

Contemporary accounts from Chang Ching-Hsuan's compendium circa 840 AD, titled the *Record of T'ang Dynasty Painters of Renown*, describe how T'ang Dynasty artists were using full-body gestures, with and without a brush, and horizontality painting on the floor, over 1,000 years before Pollock. Wang Mo (785 to 805), whose name translates as 'Ink Wang', rejected the orthodoxy of painting of the T'ang Dynasty (Lachman 1992) and 'being gloriously drunk ... splashed ink on the silk, laughing and singing all the while. He would kick at it, or smear it with his hand' (Lachman 1992, p. 501). Others painted by dipping their hair in a bucket and using their head as a brush (Lachman 1992; Sullivan 1979). Another artist ran around silk placed on the floor 'several dozen times', before finally spilling and flinging ink across the surface in a gestural motion similar to Pollock's dripping technique. Once the ink was on the silk, he placed other material over the surface, had someone sit on it, and then dragged them across the surface (Lachman 1992; Sullivan 1979).

Adding and then dragging a person's body weight would have compressed the ink into new forms, while subtracting other areas in which erasure of form and meaning would have become evident. This process of compression, subtraction and erasure brings to mind similarities with Gerhard Richter's scraping paint with a squeegee process. Given that untrammelled artists used expressive abstraction, with the event on the canvas, along with gestures that preceded Pollock's dripping or Richter's scraping techniques, they could be seen as the first Action Painters. Consequently, I view this project's gestural lineage as deriving from the untrammelled artists (T'ang Dynasty), the Literati and Sho; through to Hidai (Japanese avant-garde, pre-WWII) and the Action Painters (1950s); and to contemporary Ink Artists, such as Wang Dongling.

2.4.5 Fundamental 5: Revisiting and Refining

From the very beginning of calligraphy, repetition played a role in perfecting the mark. Calligraphers study the masters by copying their style to perfect the precision of their mark. Then, once the artist has developed his or her own technique, he or she often revisits work to further perfect earlier marks. Contemporary artists such as Zhijie and Mingchip mirror their calligraphic ancestors, such as Teshu and Xizhi, in this area. Series presentation becomes not only possible, but also a logical consequence of this repetitive process. Therefore, refining and revisiting earlier marks is a key fundamental that is consistent in this gestural lineage.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Resolving the Elements

3.1.1 The Process

The challenge for this research was to continue developing a range of personal markings derived from text, while honouring the core traditions of calligraphy that have evolved in a long and nuanced history. Heidegger's notion of *poiesis* 'is a bringing forth of something out of itself' out of concealment (Bolt 2004, p. 59). For gestural abstraction of text, it shows how the combination of artist, brush and ink creates a mark. As material is manipulated, the artwork itself begins to input what is required to complete. This places the artist in a position of duality, where there is a simultaneous creating and responding to the material's response to gesture. Barbara Bolt (2004, p. 78) is an artist and author who frames the act of creating a painting in terms of 'co-emergence rather than mastery' because all gestural marks are made in response to a material that cannot be absolutely controlled. However, Pollock asserted that 'there are no accidents' (Lachman 1992, p. 510).



Figure 12: Jackson Pollock Painting

Summer 1950, photo: Hans Namuth

Viewed 1 November 2014 <<http://nga.gov.au/Pollock/action.htm>>

Both may be correct because the artist moves body and tools to manipulate the material into responding. These material characteristics influence the gesture and resultant mark. However, by examining Pollock's gestural dance in Hans Namuth's famous film of Pollock creating a painting, it is obvious that Pollock had control over the flow and mark to a remarkable degree. He also enlisted chance and gravity to ultimately influence the result. Therefore, he allowed a certain range of acceptable parameters, or processes, in which to work. This gestural range created certain marks in certain materials delivered at a certain speed. Just as elite athletes fine-tune the precision of their results with practice, artists such as Pollock and earlier calligraphers continually refined and disciplined their neurology to create and respond in a co-emergent practice of allowing and determining. According to Bolt (2004, p. 78), 'in a co-emergent practice ... matter is in process as a dynamic interplay through which meaning and effects emerge'. Using chance and chaos within well-defined parameters creates individuality (Lehrer 2007).

Substrate experimentations have ranged from traditional paper to linen as a contemporary silk equivalent, clear plastic, Perspex, wood, steel and polystyrene. To restrict the parameters, I made the strategic decision to incorporate material that has a strong affinity with tradition, but also seeks to find fresh purchase in contemporary painting. Creating my own paint from burning my poetry book aligned with the traditional process of burning material, and remained in the fundamental parameters. However, using my poetry book was a very specific, non-arbitrary choice of a novel material of uniquely personal text. I see all my poems as being lyrical meditations on mortality, or more specifically life and death and where we come from and where we go. They involve word play and often multiple meanings to open the poem to reader interpretation in the same way as my paintings involve abstracted open markings to encourage viewer interpretation. The *Bloodshot* poems are 25 individual poems in their own right, which morph into a complete work that I view as one poem in 25 chapters. This unity, or journey through the poems, has many similarities on

how I view my painting, in that whilst each element may be a complete work in itself, the overall combination becomes a significant whole exhibition.

This process of burning these poem books in line with tradition subtracted matter as the paper was burned, which erased original form and meaning. The compressed matter that was once a book, and then ash, was further transformed into paint. Processing this book ash literally compressed the full content of the text from the 25 poems into paint. A surprising discovery was that the palette could vary drastically, depending on the type of binder and substrate used. Pigment colours from the ash informed the resultant palette hue of grey used. The results could range from a powdery, light grey to a very dark grey, with a similar variation in consistency, ranging from fluid to full-bodied paint. These varied effects of viscosity consequently influenced variations of textured effect on each surface, which was ultimately dependent on how finely ground the ash was.



Figure 13: Stephen Woodbury, Palette Experiments, 2014

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Palette experiments—lines of different mixes of water/binder with one book's ash

Photo © 2014 Stephen Woodbury

Closer inspection of the book-ash paint also provided quiet areas of discovery where there could be the visible signs of pages still within the medium. The less ground areas of the ash contained the remnants of typed text, along with illegible

text taken beyond semantics. These traces of material of the original book could be seen as revealing the artist's presence in the process of creation, and provided a draw of familiarity for the viewer. Just as Pollock's work includes traces of cigarette butts, boot prints and other bodily detritus, these scrolls included remnants or traces of the source material, including book staples and other artist traces, such as brush hairs, fingerprints and footprints. This nuance adds to the individuality of the process, where the handmade and individual artist gesture is temporally captured and recorded in the material, thereby further exposing the agency of the body and brush. Further, the meaning of the poems is transformed through the violent, destructive action of fire to become ephemeral ash traces that contain/retain aspects of text that are determined by the elemental force of fire. I see this as a transition, rather than destruction. The ash form is re-born initially as the *Book-Marks*, then further reincarnated into hand written text on the *Poem Painting* and ultimately the *Untrammelled Horizontal* and *Untrammelled Vertical Lines*. This process alters the meaning of the poetic, reincarnated text to literally take new forms, which will variously influence the viewer standing before these new creations. Although the destructive forces of fire and a somewhat violent reforming of the ash was involved in mixing, then reapplying the textual material, the end result includes dominant and subtle, elusive ambiguous effects that unite these opposite material gestures as each of the separate elements activates the next. Offering singular gestural or material readings alongside the unified whole opens the possible viewer associations and ultimate interpretation of this cyclical process. Ultimately, these ambiguous, abstracted, open natured markings are similar to the ambiguous nature of my poems that are devoid of one narrative reading alone.

The varying viscosity of the ink/paint made from book ash made the responsive material of paper and linen best suited to capturing and highlighting the individually brushed surface, which has been the case for centuries. The gesture involved can include a more intimate handwriting, or *écriture*, through to the full-bodied gesture. Just as the Daros collection artists use their large, body-scaled gestures for effect, I used scale as a weapon to deploy ink/paint, which activates an even greater experiential involvement because the viewer becomes immersed in body-scaled gestures. Calligraphy has progressed and enlarged the gesture over

time. Today, there is the possibility to scale up gesture through digital billboard printing and even light projection. While this is an interesting area for future research to consider, the current research returned to the body as a primary gesture.

Just as Ryman's white squares offer many variations, I sought to extend the material and gestural combination. The intention was to remain true to tradition and re-present this in a contemporary painting practice by removing external or emotive elements as much as possible. Although my poems are open styled abstract pieces in themselves (see Appendix A), using the text from these poems as form allowed the lines of that text to be altered beyond semantics. Studio experimentation led to the discovery that the medium became the content, and the process became the calligraphic methodology.

As author of the *Bloodshot* poems and the artwork, my unique mark is suspended in the material. The poems were initially handwritten using an intimate ecriture, which was transferred to book form when published. Reading these poems requires a slowing of the mind, where the opportunity to engage and reflect is determined by the viewer. Reading activates internal associations and ultimately creates an emotive reaction, similar to viewing paintings. Poetry is an emotional abstraction of language. It has similarities in content to gestural abstract painting, which also involves the experiential reception of abstracted concepts and markings. William Wordsworth (cited in O'Brien 2012, p. 8) described poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... from emotion recollected in tranquility', which aligns with calligraphers' desire to slow the mind to encourage internal reflection and enlightenment. Using my own published poems remains true to this tradition invoked by calligraphers for centuries. The result from studio explorations was the idea of the content being *in* the material where the poems perform the meaning in new gestural markings, which further highlights the fact that materiality and gesture in calligraphy are inextricably linked.

3.2 The Strategies: Compression/Subtraction/Erasure

- Compression: a reduction in volume; to flatten, squeeze or press into a smaller space; abridge.
- Subtraction: taking an amount away.
- Erasure: remove recorded material from/obliterating original (Oxford Dictionary 2015).

While the strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure can be individually applied, they can also overlap and be interdependent. These strategies can be invoked at both a content and material level. Therefore, the strategies can be applied in regard to meaning and physical substance to create abstraction of the line derived from text. My initial studio work began with using text from the headings of chapters from my poetry books. The images below are examples of gesturally applied traditional materials and full-bodied brush gestures, employing the three uses of text.



Figure 14: Stephen Woodbury, (from left): *Red Poems*, *Shed Poems*, *Dead Poems* and *Bloodshot*, 2014

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Each is: Ink on paper, 60 x 40 cm

Photo © 2014 Stephen Woodbury

Although this work remains true to ancient traditions and methodology by using a similar process, and substitutes English letters for Chinese/Japanese characters, it does not extensively test the material or gestural aspects. Having established the fundamentals and three uses of text, the strategies were invoked to further new knowledge in this research.

3.2.1 Compression

3.2.1.1 *Source-Book Oracle*

Compression was the dominant strategy invoked when creating the *Source-Book*, as seen in the images below. I decided to create an Origin work that contained all the poems, written into a contemporary hard surface equivalent of the most ancient carved forms in oracle bone and bamboo. This material affinity with the carved hard surface allowed for a new interpretation and re-presentation of the most ancient calligraphy (pre-Xizhi) through the use of Perspex.



Figure 15: Stephen Woodbury, *Bloodshot Source-Book*, 2014 to 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Perspex, 60 x 40 cm

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

Using an intimate *écriture*, I hand-etched each of the 25 poems onto Perspex. Using one sheet per poem resulted in a Perspex ‘book’ of the complete *Bloodshot* poems, compressed into one sculptural form. Compressing these sheets into one artefact activated the three uses of text, as a combination of the 25 sheets results in an overwriting, abstracted effect similar to compressed overpainting. However, here, the text was carved into the clear Perspex with a power-tool, which enabled a flowing mark that, once framed, created the impression of floating text, suspended in mid-air, or frozen within a block of ice. The millimetres between

each sheet cast shadows over the surrounding layer's suspended text, and were influenced by the direction and intensity of the light source. The resultant sculptural form was one of quiet, elegant monumentality that allowed the sentinel form, or oracle, to hold all the text that was the source for each artwork. This quiet presence was in contrast to the violence of subtracting the textual material.

3.2.1.2 Ash Book-Marks

Another exemplar work that invoked compression as a key strategy was *Book-Marks* (shown below). Each ash work was a direct result of the alchemical process of transformation, where fire was invoked to transform or compress the poem book. The ephemeral nature of fire subtracts detail and material to erase previous meaning and form as the book burns. This reduction in volume retains the essence of the typed text in the ash and staples, which hint at the origin of the book itself. This also provides an effective use of familiarity, or a 'teaser' of recognition in material, and activates the three uses of text as the fragile ash is brushed into lines through an intimate, delicate gesture. Whilst these could be determined by viewer interpretations to mean or reference a contemporary existence where text floats in many media and fails to fully articulate a position, it can also be viewed as a meditation on ancient painterly traditions that have invoked unseen universal forces to create the work. My agency can be seen in the editing and control of the process and artwork created within a narrow procedural structure, however, it is the fire that ultimately decides what snippet of text remains legible within the resultant book ash. Therefore I see these *Book-Marks* as being the result of the process that is in line with subjects dealing with the ephemeral nature of existence that artists like Charwei Tsai invoke within *Incense Sutra*, and consistent with the ethereal nature of the sentiments expressed in the benchmark *Orchid Pavilion Preface* text:

Whether life is long or short is up to destiny, but it will end in nothingness (Sui 2016)

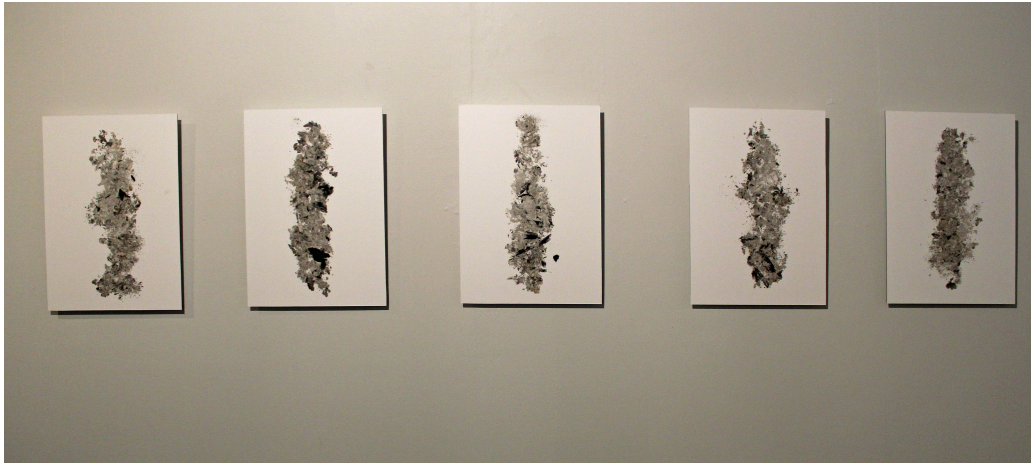


Figure 16: Stephen Woodbury, *Ash Book-Marks*, 2014 to 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Bloodshot book ash

Each is 40 x 60 cm

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

3.2.2 Subtraction

Subtraction can be achieved by physically removing material (through scraping, erasing, sanding, gravity, fire and etching) and through adding material (through processes such as overpainting). This results in the subtraction of detail and tends to erase original forms, generally initiating erasure of content. The remaining traces of these processes often manifest as an accumulation of physical residue by-product. In the current project, some of these ‘tailings’ were incorporated in the final installation.

3.2.2.1 Poem Paintings

Key subtraction experiments involved painting literal text, and then physically scraping material with a metallic scraper to subtract paint. An exemplar work regarding subtraction can be seen in *Poem Paintings*, where each piece of linen is sized with a uniquely mixed paint that creates a slightly reflective surface reminiscent of traditional silk support. As a contemporary take on a millennia old surface, the weft and weave of the linen surface is further highlighted under the silk-like surface reflections.

Each surface was divided into 25 smaller panels, where one poem was placed with traditional brush and hand/wrist/arm gesture. The complete poems were formed into literal text with a homemade piping tool, similar to what a cake decorator would use to ice a cake. Once each poem was fully formed using the same hand written ecriture as the *Source Book*, I used an arm/body gesture with a metallic scraper to literally subtract material to erase the original poems. The resulting scraping subtraction gesture created new forms. A surprising point of interest in this process is how intimate the subtractions could be. Just as a brush allows many fine variations with the application of a line or addition of material, the effects could be similarly varied when using a steel scraper. With a slightly different pressure, speed or angle, the controlled subtractions could become quite nuanced.

The linens had each poem fully formed, and then erased through subtracted material, resulting in a unique gestural mark that also subtracted detail of content. These paintings retained the marked trace of newly created forms. The physical subtracted material ultimately became a handful of what was once fully formed text (presented as ‘tailings’ on entry to the exhibition). In both the tailings and linen surfaces, the subtracted paint literally retained the content in its material DNA—first from the book ash, and then with the transformation of literally formed text to a compressed handful of material (‘tailings’). Although the initial impression may be of a fast, or even violent gesture, I actually used the scraper with the finely tune intimacy of a brush that gave a subdued and controlled mark, resulting in the fact that these paintings took the longest time to create.



Figure 17: Stephen Woodbury, *Poem Paintings (Four Bloodshot Panels)*, 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Book-ash paint on linen

150 x 480 cm

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

3.2.3 Erasure

Erasure is closely aligned with and often activated by the strategy of subtraction. As aforementioned, methods such as overpainting poems onto one surface can also erase original form and meaning via a compressed monochrome form of new gestural configurations. Similarly, subtracting material from a surface often erases form, which can compress material into new forms and meaning. My various erasure experiments included pencil erasers to literally excise handwritten graphite and charcoal text, power-sanders to remove substrate material containing traces of painted text, a scraper to subtract material, and absorption of ink into substrate materials. These techniques erased original form and generally created a compressed pile of subtracted erasures as physical remnants of the processes (see previous image). While the results from these experiments were extremely

promising and aesthetically pleasing, I decided to incorporate a body-brushed gesture (in line with the fundamentals), which resulted in the exemplar erasure works of the *Untrammelled Vertical* and *Untrammelled Horizontal* lines.

3.2.3.1 Untrammelled Vertical—Brushed Lines

Combining the idea of the line as the basis of all calligraphy (Sogen & Katsujo 1983) with the material and content derived from the book-ash paint led to the brushed line paintings *The Untrammelled Verticals*. This series of five paper scrolls incorporates the line brushed with material that is an erased form of the *Bloodshot* book, compressed into paint. This material was initially obliterated by fire and then further reconstituted into paint. Using a gestural line (which is the basis of calligraphy) to further obliterate original form erased at both a content and material level, which also changes the meaning as a result of the new form. Although the gestural mark may initially be apparently void of any representational connotations, through the open abstraction of this gestural mark, along with its literal poetic, genetic DNA, the text is able to attain a greater meaning than what the semantically bound poems originally aspired to. The established process of this project induces a utilisation of my body and meditative focussed attention, which compresses and erases the initial form of the poetry book and delivers new meanings as text is transformed into a line with a conceptual and material history. This renders the vertical lines as quiet sentinels who reveal their secrets more readily for those attuned to the material and gestural whispers from the project and historical past. The selection of five scrolls was determined by the size of the gallery walls and as a means of illustrating the fifth fundamental of revisiting and refining earlier marks.

The line is a traditional staple underpinning calligraphy that highlights every slight variation of the brush stroke and individuality of the artist. In this case, while these lines may seem a pre-linguistic, pre-form mark, each line is actually an individual, marked expression of an artist that is as unique as a fingerprint. The repetitive gesture of five similarly sized supports in the same material with a similar full-body gesture shows how slight variations in gesture, amounts of material and speed can be captured. Using an up-scaled body/brush gesture with

an oversized calligraphy brush highlights the physicality of the body, where the durable 300 gsm paper has a full-body gestural brushstroke of book-ash paint compressed into its fibres. Each panel builds a platform for the next and highlights variations in the first four fundamentals. The palette varies from line to line in mathematical progression, where the titles betray the amount of *Bloodshot* books used to make the paint—one, two, four, eight and 16. While each ‘finger’ may initially look very similar, on closer inspection, the differences become nuanced forms of individuality. The use of the vertical lines introduces a vertical flow effect, which is frustrated when combined with the five panels in series, as the eye tends to fall and move horizontally across the scrolls simultaneously.

These large gestural strokes were created horizontally on the ground, and reveal the process of creating. It is possible to follow the drips from the book-ash paint-loaded brush as it was manhandled from the bucket, across the pristine white paper to begin with a violent rupture, or collision of the paint and paper. Traces of the splash are captured around this beginning, which was then physically wrestled, in one breath and movement, towards the end of the scroll. The material was pushed or forced across the substrate to end with the lifting of paint-deprived brush hairs, resulting in an open-ended type of gestural line. When repositioned and displayed on the vertical surface of the wall, there is a feeling of a natural ‘fall’ or gravity flow effect with each brushstroke that belies the actual force required to make the line.

Artists use gravity and chance as key strategies in many different ways. Pollock’s flinging of paint from the end of his brush with a wrist/arm gesture created a fall or ‘throw’ of paint that invoked a performative and rhythmic incantation of chance and gestural flow to build up the rhythmic mesh of his drip paintings—which were also created on the ground. Varying the viscosity enables many different effects by allowing gravity to largely decide the resultant mark. Lee Ufan’s paintings, such as *Line Works* of the 1970s, used deliberate brushstrokes that left a mark determined by the removal of material on the brush as it was moved across a substrate. That is, he painted a deliberate line that ended when the material ran out. Chance was involved to a degree because the exact length of the line depended on the amount of material, speed and pressure of the brush.

However, Ufan retained a great degree of control due to his experience with materials and desired outcome. Both artists invoked chance as a strategy, yet remained the instigator and ultimate editor of the process they created.

These *Untrammelled Lines* are a consequence of parameters created: book-ash paint made the brushed lines, done in one breath with no corrections. Altering the palette hues from line to line by doubling the number of books used to make the paint enabled subtle, syncopated variety in the line's appearance through colour and viscosity. This extra binder required to mix the additional amount of ash meant that, ultimately, the 16 book-ash line was not only longer than the others, but was darker. Although first impressions may be of an easy and perhaps effortless flow, closer examination reveals that a huge amount of physical effort was required to transport the erased material and content across the substrate.



Figure 18: Stephen Woodbury, *Untrammelled Verticals* (from left: one, four, 16, eight, two), 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Book ash paint on paper

Each is: 300/360 x 113 cm (variable)

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

3.2.3.2 Untrammelled Horizontal Full-body Line

In a 1957 critical review of 'The Calligraphy of East and West' in *Ink Art* magazine, a critic wrote, 'one feels that more than the horizontal lines, it is the vertical impacts which constitute the main operative force' (Takiguchi, cited in Hariu 1992, p. 35). However, I tend to judge a line on its merits and find there are many ways in which an artist can use a line. It can be delicate, like a web, or a trace. It can also be decisive and slice a substrate.

Antoni Tàpies is famous for the physicality and material qualities of his work. Employing huge gestural marks on heavily textured surfaces, he created an oeuvre of exploring materiality and gesture, where the strength of his work was derived from 'multilayered contrasts' (Franzke 1992). Material became a defining factor of my 'untrammelled lines' and brought to mind the work of Tàpies. Franzke (1992, p. 313) described Tàpies's method of incorporating every element in his pictures as an 'active stimulus' to enable meaning at formal and material levels by being 'potentiated by the expressive possibilities inherent in the act of painting'. My *Untrammelled Horizontal Line* similarly transforms the gritty materiality of the grey book-ash paint to become an active stimulus to draw from ancient calligraphic traditions, and potentiate all the material, formal, gestural and abstract elements into a unified whole. The sheer physicality of the body effort required to push the material across the four linen panels becomes obvious. The ash of 32 books and the required binder literally adds weight to the painting.

The line began with a bigger brushstroke of the paint-loaded bristles, which was then forced into a migration of material to the other end of the line. Instead of the open lifting gesture of the brush in the vertical lines, the horizontal line ended with a further compression of material into a condensed 'blob' of circular brush hairs. The materiality of the ash and staples are apparent throughout the line and at the ends. The materiality of the gestural mark made in one breath highlights the body presence, which was achieved through restricting the movement of the feet. Instead of walking alongside the line as it was made, the restriction of movement from the feet transposed the majority of force into the torso, arms and brush to

manhandle the material across the panels. This resulted in a slight curve to the line that betrays the scale of my body. Interestingly, the brush used for this is the same length as a Katana, or sword, and provides a synergy as the line, although thick and gritty, slices the silk-like ground of the four linen scrolls. Although I have spent decades using traditional inks and rice papers, my intention in this research was to find a contemporary equivalent to re-vision and re-contextualise the ancient calligraphic fundamental elements.

As with *Poem Paintings*, each of the four scrolls was prepared with a mica-infused paint to become a contemporary silk equivalent. To further highlight the materiality of the substrate and remain true to ancient body-brush gestures, I hand-brushed the surface to allow important, subtle variations in each stroke, instead of the smoother finish that could be achieved through spray painting or using a paint roller. Leaving the edges of the linen scrolls raw added vertical contrast to the overall effect. Standing before this finished work makes one aware of their physical scale in relation to this monumental piece, and reinforces the unique gestures required to create the painting. The surface sheen of the silk-like linen varies its reflective qualities as the viewer moves across the paintings' surface due to the variation in light intensity. The silk-like surface, when contrasted with the grittier, matte book-ash paint, allows the physicality of the erased line's form to be further illuminated, along with the time taken to create the painting.

As this work is in the untrammelled/Pollock lineage, the intention was to highlight the body gesture and materiality. Content is literally held in the paint and consequently the painting's internal structure. Although the actual line may have been created in one monumental effort and breath, closer inspection reveals the many, many hours of preparation that were required to prime the linen, create the paint, and prepare mentally and physically before the line could be made. This material gesture both temporally captures the text of my poems (that took 15 months to write) and condenses and builds on over 25 years of previously training my neurology to gesturally capture a material mark. Just as an athlete may describe a moment of peak performance in terms of 'being in the zone', it is this focussed attention and mind-body connection that places this painting process in

line with ancient calligraphers where the fine-tuning of body and brush connection can allow almost infinite variations in gestural markings. Returning to the essential underpinnings of calligraphy (which is the line), filtered through these strategies, resulted in a unique gestural mark derived from invoking calligraphy as a methodology.

Keeping to the ideal of no corrections enabled a contained universe of material to be temporally suspended in each brushstroke. Approaching these works allowed the peripheral vision to become immersed in the monumental lines and detail in the material that ultimately created a fusion of multilayered contrasts. It was a deliberate decision to use and highlight non-traditional material that contrasts the difference to traditional rice paper and ink. The intention was to have the viewer constantly aware of their presence in front of relatively contemporary material. Including the rawness of the linen at the edges, combined with the visual ruptures between the scrolls was a strategy to challenge easy viewer interpretation. Similarly, I see the gritty, ash infused, textually flooded, horizontal line as a whole. This marked surface of transformed text is a temporally preserved scaffold that retains the gestural movement of my body and brush, which further highlights my agency within this process. These huge horizontal and vertical gestural marks illustrated a subtraction, erasure and compression of content, form and materiality, in which the transformation into one line highlighted the body-scale and was consistent with the aims and purposes of this research.

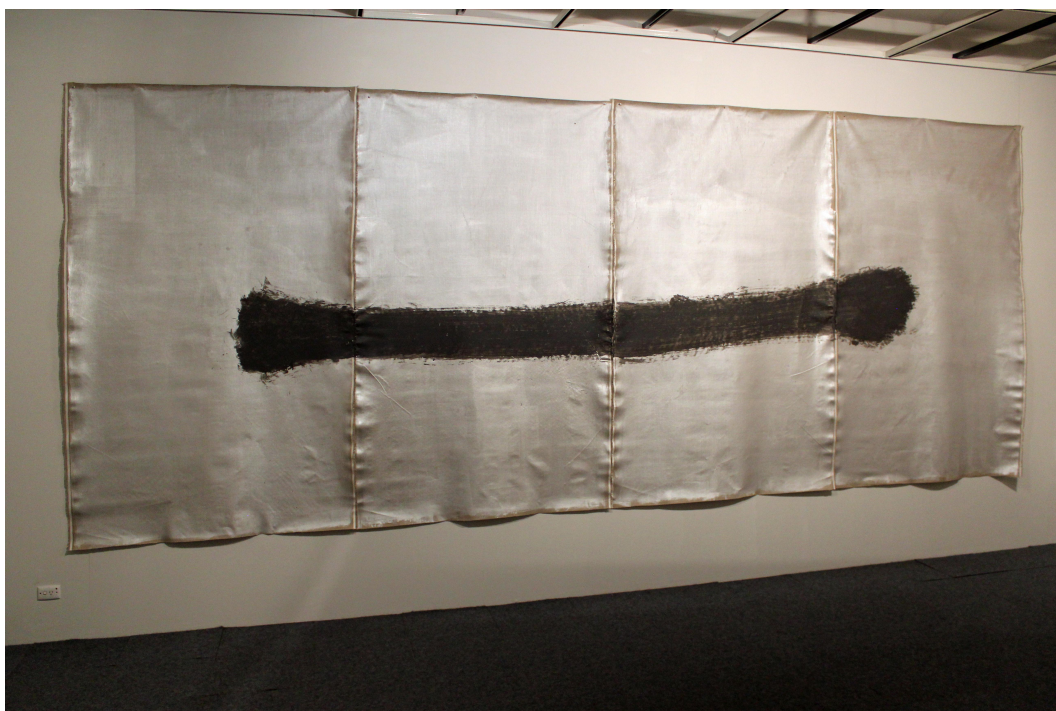


Figure 19: Stephen Woodbury, *Untrammelled Horizontal*, 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Book ash paint on linen

250 x 600 cm

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

3.2.3.3 Full Stop

A late inclusion was the ‘full stop’ of the scorched stainless steel mixing bowl that was used to transform the book to ash, and the ash to paint. Incorporated as a punctuation mark in the installation, it reflects the full stop I use at the end of my poem books. However, here, the palette marks on the stainless steel bowl were totally derived as a remnant of the processes of creating each painted work in the exhibition. The darker hue reflects the continual burning of books and mixing/creation of paint used in each work, and is literally the palette of smoke. Processing the ash to paint by mixing various binders necessitated a brushed circular gesture to (partially) grind the ash to paint around the inside of the bowl. This continuous, circuitous line gesture was performed for many hours throughout this project. The material and gestural essence of the compression of text from the books that were burned to supply the basis of material was further transformed to

enable the capturing of gesture. The procedural arena enabled all of the paintings in the installation, and holds an erased form compressed onto its scorched surface.



Figure 20: Stephen Woodbury, *Full Stop*, 2014 to 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Mixed on stainless steel, Ø 25 cm

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

3.3 Installation of *The Continuing Ellipse*

The included photographs of the installation were taken from a trial setup to test the coherence of the overall work. This was installed in one gallery as a literal and metaphorical ellipse to loosely follow the progression of text through both powerful forms and elegantly restrained marks. Using more gallery space for the final hanging allowed the entry space to contain the tailings (or remnant by-products) of each process. On entry, one is greeted with the group of ash, subtracted scrapings (from the *Poem-Books*) and etchings from the *Source-Book*. These works, positioned on the plinth, allow an introduction to what lies beyond in the rest of the installation. Each of these piles of material is a consequence of the self-imposed procedural parameters (fundamentals filtered through the strategies); illuminate the change of text from literal to abstracted; and literally contain text in a transformed, compressed and erased material state.

Yve-Alain Bois (cited in de Azevedo, para. 27) suggested that ‘form is always carrying a meaning and the deepest or the most important meaning is always on the level of form’. This installation of work holds form in material and gesture based on ancient traditions and methodology. There is a rhythm that is found in this series presentation of work, which includes the tailings or procedural traces. When combined as a unified installed whole, it offers a revealing arena in which the intimate and obvious are available for the viewer among the various scaled gestures. Series presentation highlights the difference in gesture between each mark, and adds rhythm through repetition and varied scale. The content, palette, gesture and material provide the installation’s skeleton, which offers a revealing gateway to a contemporary interpretation and re-presentation of an ancient methodology. Offering a space for a cerebral shift, this installation aimed to poetically reincarnate text through (violent) subtraction, erasure and compression into new forms, where meaning similarly was rebirthed through individualised material and focussed body gesture.



Figure 21: Stephen Woodbury, Installation View of *The Continuing Ellipse*, 2015

Stephen Woodbury (b. 1968), Australia

Photo © 2015 Stephen Woodbury

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This research aimed to establish a process built on ancient calligraphic traditions, which extended this lineage by freeing text from semantics. Abstracting text beyond semantics has been the trajectory of calligraphy for millennia, and firmly situates this research in the long and diverse lineage of abstracting the textual line. Temporal possibilities of material are a key element for establishing abstract art, in which the gesture and material are the content. The proposition is that gesture that occurs over a period can be held, compressed and sustained as a unique visual moment in painting. Reviewed artists' methodologies reinforce Varnedoe's (2006) central theme that pictures of nothing actually represent something, and helped me focus—or rather, refocus—on the process of painting. A consequence of deliberately defining a process derived from ancient methodologies was the creation of new forms produced from the procedural processing of the textual line.

Initially exploring the deep essential structure of calligraphy determined the five core fundamental elements required for calligraphy as a methodology, as opposed to gestural abstract painting alone. Incorporating these fundamental elements created a somewhat objective or scientific approach to process, in which there were limited painting elements upon which to build the framework of this project. Creating strict procedural guidelines by taking cues from ancient calligraphers' methodology led to compression, subtraction and erasure being invoked as clear strategies to guide the research. While this initially seemed an ambitious and almost contradictory proposition, the resulting process led to a deep, specific niche in the history of calligraphy. The strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure could be considered reductive because they remove, reduce or take away. However, surprisingly, they can also be produced by an accumulation of material, which was included as a pile of etchings, scrapings and ash as by-product detritus resulting from making the artwork in this process.

Text is the basis of calligraphy, and the line is the basis of text. The evolution of calligraphy over millennia has progressed from literal fully formed text to the

more abstracted gestural mark derived from text. This research has discovered three uses of text within calligraphy as a methodology: literal, signifier and abstracted gestural marks. Taking Wang Xizhi's emperor-approved calligraphy as a benchmark enabled the lineage of this project to become clearer as I followed the line's progression through to current Chinese Ink Artists, such as Dongling. Surprising synergies between T'ang Dynasty untrammelled artists, Song Dynasty Literati and the mid-twentieth century Action Painters further illustrated that gesture and expressive marking has a long history that may have initiated in China, but has now evolved well beyond these beginnings. Expressive untrammelled gesture in calligraphy precedes artists such as Pollock by over 1,000 years, shows Varnedoe's continuing ellipse in action, and reinforces that these gestural approaches are nothing new. Varnedoe's ellipse is a seemingly endless cycle of re-absorption and re-presentation.

Taking the essential structural underpinnings of calligraphy resulted in the line (derived from the content of my poetry book) being re-presented. Abstracted beyond semantics and not referencing nature, the surfaces were a textured, textual landscape in which the subject was ultimately transformed to the material and gesture itself. Having the gesture and material as the subject both aligned with the essentials of painting favoured by the modernist painters of the mid-twentieth century, and was a distant relative of the untrammelled and Literati artists who privileged the gestural brushstroke. However, here the gestures are not simply expression alone. Rather, the transformation of text through the strategies has reformulated text and consequently re-presented semantic meanings. This oscillation between abstraction and semantic meaning opens the arena to viewer interpretation, which consequently situated this research's contribution within the continuing ellipse of a millennial lineage. Restoring and revitalising ancient calligraphic traditions through re-presentation in contemporary practice illustrated a key finding that there is a structural difference between calligraphy as a methodology, as opposed to calligraphy as a style, because calligraphy derives its form from the line of text, rather than pure expression or representation alone.

The Chinese tradition was transformed by the Japanese evolution, which influenced American post-WWII abstraction. This is currently being reabsorbed

into contemporary Chinese Ink Artists and ellipses back to the Japanese influence, which ellipses back to the classical Chinese structuring of the foundations of calligraphy. Varnedoe's concept of the ellipse illustrates how each artist inputs their contribution to the continuum of art history. With this in mind, I took my affinity and experiences with both gestural abstract/action painting and calligraphy, and reinterpreted and re-presented these from my corner of the world. My contribution to this conversation, or ellipse, can be seen with *The Continuing Ellipse* installation, where the history of the studio-led research can be seen from the ash beginnings, through to the huge body manipulated lines. Here the mood of the poems is amplified in the gesturally manipulated material presence.

Within the installation are thoughtful iterations and material reincarnations. Burning the *Bloodshot* book created the *Book-Marks*. Further processing the ash created the *Poem Paintings*, in which fully formed literal text was further erased and subtracted to create a pile of tailings that contained text in material, as well as the erased, subtracted compression of text in a handful of re-formed material. This ephemeral, alchemistic processing from book, through fire to paint, to gestural line in *Untrammelled Lines* literally held content in the material and re-formed text at a content and material level.

Content came from my poems and remained a constant, as did the book-ash material, which affected the palette and the gesture required. Remaining true to the body gesture created a combination of elements that could be considered cornerstones. Further testing was undertaken through substrate and scale. Including the intimate ecriture gesture and pre-Xizhi reference of carving into oracle bone and bamboo led to the *Source-Book*. Positioned as an oracle work that contained all the text or content in subsequent work, it became a sentinel that nourished the installation. The contemplation of ecriture and calligraphy definitions produced *Poem Paintings* and *Source-Book*.

Hand-making my own paint allowed for viscosity variations, which further affected the absorption qualities and resultant gesture. Although different in many ways compared to traditional ink recipes, I view this book-ash paint as a consistent contemporary version of traditional inks and a superior material when

considering this project's parameters. The material itself is delicate and nuanced allowing for many varying effects and also uniquely individualised, due to the incorporation of my own poetry. The materiality of the surfaces and hues created a consistent rhythmic tonal progression through syncopated strokes that resulted from an ethereal and ephemeral transmutation of matter. I viewed this as a poetic process that crossed cultural boundaries and initiated an intimate poetic dialogue through the individual gestural and material incantations. This process was derived and defined from ancient methodology, tested through materiality and gesture, and ultimately created a procedural structure that could be altered through the strategies (of compression, subtraction and erasure) and fundamentals.

Reordering and rearranging these cornerstone elements created an installation of intimate and full-bodied gesture, based on personal content, presented in series that altered the visual properties of the medium. Ecriture to full-bodied gesture was presented in a narrow, structured theoretical process. The body and meditative process of this project allows for distinctly unique marking, which in this case, includes contemporary materials in line with centuries of tradition.

The notion of transforming matter and re-using or rebirthing this ephemeral resultant material throughout the artworks presented a literal creation of something out of itself, and illustrated Bolt's notion of the co-emergent practice and Heidegger's notion of *poiesis* held in Elkin's paint antennae. Reflecting on these points also allowed me to enjoy this poetic notion of writing poems and then burning/destroying text to be re-born in the ash and paint, which became the genetic material for the intimate body-brushed lines. By taking what could be viewed as archaic and possibly irrelevant ancient traditions (from a wider contemporary art perspective), and exploring the extremes of a delicate and intimate act of writing/painting poems, with the combination of the intimate and masculine forceful gesture of oversized *Untrammelled Lines*, I view these works as being consistent with the traditional underpinnings of calligraphy. Further, while erasing my presence by placing no signature on the paintings could be viewed as an act of humility, the resultant individuality of each line betrays my body and physical presence, which are forever suspended in the markings of the book-ash lines. These can be viewed as a true signature in themselves. Rebirthing

this material throughout the process gives a contemporary new life to the essence of the poetic text, marked through a poetic process that retains some of its past-life incantations on the surfaces.

While slowing the mind may seem at odds with the quickening of life that seems to be occurring in the contemporary era, the intention to create a space to slow the mind was a strategy to align with the ancient viewing approach. The installation in the gallery space is largely all-encompassing as the viewer negotiates the work, with the opportunity to continually experience revelations and concentric elliptical connections from gesture, scale, palette, material and content. The reduced palette sets the tone that highlights all other elements. Ultimately, this type of work is not so much the painting of an emotion, but rather creating an armature to enable mood. Although the initial intention was to establish a systematic type of enquiry into the core structure of calligraphy, and remove emotional associations as much as possible through the strategies, an unexpected finding, on reflection, is how much the installation creates its own mood. This mood varies depending on the viewer's response to the grey palette, scale, material and gestural abstracted form, and illustrates how it is seemingly impossible to remove an emotive response in an art form that requires viewer interaction.

This project's questions were as follows:

- How can text-based information be transformed through the painting strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure?
- What is the nature of the change of information from the written word versus its abstracted equivalent in the painting world?

The first question was answered in the nature of the change of text from the first to third use of text. This change can be seen through the strategies of invoking compression, subtraction and erasure through fire, gravity, scraping and body-brushed gesture to alter content from fully formed text, through to the abstracted line. The second question was answered by the installation as it illustrated the nature of the change of text to its abstracted equivalent in the painting world, from the *Source-Book* through to the *Book-Marks*, *Poem Paintings* and *Untrammelled Vertical and Horizontal Lines*, culminating with *Full Stop*.

Pushing material boundaries through the manipulation of matter made from my own poem book provided an important point of difference when compared to current Ink Artists, who remain true to traditional rice paper and ink. This research took the position that it was problematic to consider traditional materials alone, and focused on materiality as a means of extending ancient traditions. The physical struggle between ink and paper has been a constant in calligraphy for millennia. The material struggle in this research not only aligned with calligraphy, but also took this project through the material and gestural concerns of the Abstract Expressionists and modernism. I blended both traditions to further the ancient traditions of calligraphy.

Within my practice, I have determined a unique personal process that is based on tradition and re-presented with contemporary artwork. Just as Ryman finds apparent unlimited variation possible and finer nuances of exploration within his parameters, this process offers the exciting opportunity to not only consolidate the results from this project, but also continue the calligraphic continuum through deeper explorations of these core elements. Keeping the fundamental elements constant, but with the slightest alteration in the compression, subtraction and erasure strategies, will produce different results.

In a broader art history context, I engaged in a contemporary conversation around atemporal art and the blending of Eastern and Western traditions that is largely being undertaken in China by the Ink Artists. Many of these artists are taking post-WWII Western abstraction as an influence, which results in similar marks to mid-twentieth century Abstract Expressionists. By taking my perspective and incorporating the skeletal underpinnings of calligraphy as a methodology, while extending material and gesture beyond the strict adherence that many of the Ink Artists employ to traditional materials, I have added to this contemporary dialogue. Taking a somewhat objective and systematic approach by limiting the formal painting elements in my process, while using a combination of the strategies of compression, subtraction and erasure, has allowed new knowledge to form. I have used content from my own poems; made my own ink from the ash from my books (reminiscent of traditional practice); and used my body and brush to mark a unique line, ranging from the intimate to the full-bodied. I have re-

presented these in a contemporary practice with a contemporary series presentation of the installed work. This research found that material proves a key point of difference to this continuum.

This type of calligraphy goes beyond any semantic requirements of understanding specific language. However, knowledge of what came before in the history of gestural abstraction and calligraphy offers even more profound understanding of the painting's references, which allows levels of discovery to more easily unfold. These paintings are in the language of paint, which in this case literally holds the content in its material. Kirk Varnedoe (2006, p. 272) finished his book with:

I have faith, because of works of art like this. I believe in abstract art. If I have not been able to justify it, I can perhaps say with the pragmatist, with the literalist: There it is. I have shown it to you. It has been done. It is being done. And because it can be done, it will be done.

And now, I am done.

I have great affinity with and respect for abstract painting and calligraphy. This research has discovered new processes and knowledge and uncovered traditions that may have been overlooked or forgotten. My belief that has formed from this research is that calligraphy as a methodology is a vital nuanced addition to contemporary painting. Post-Greenberg, material and brush remain important constants that add individuality and vitality to painting. The restricted painting element process that was employed in this research serves to widen the possibilities and encourage further research. I can say to the pragmatist and the realist that I have added my unique input into this ellipse:

I believe in abstracted calligraphy.
There it is. I have shown it to you.
I have done it.
It is being done because
I will continue to do it.

The ellipse continues...

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Appendix A: Selected Poems from *Bloodshot*

III

What if
it all is as shallow
as it seems -

Only make believe
and getting old?

VII

Understanding less
as you get more
familiar with it

Hoping that the hope will
stay a little
longer, growing stronger

Happiness lies
beyond the light coming;
the surgery before the train

I tried, but I gave (up)

Forgetting what I knew
before this life prematurely
Grew

XIV

Like the candle:
Always different,
continually changing
Never repeating the form
it was.

Changing again, now;
Instantaneously born
perpetually re-born.

XV

The author saw it
before he said it
written in the words
of verse

The politician knew it
before he skewed it
spoken in the words
of deceit

The layman watched it
before he forgot it
living in his world
of bliss

XVII

Elusive, but occasional
Tasted, enticing
 dripping
Sweet like syrup

With the first inhalation
begins the Dying from birth

Everyone will stay to go
What will you miss most
A taste, a vision, a sound
Wanting more of that –
The pleasant distractions
The Hunger is for the one
you haven't got
The Pain is from the one
who went away

I wish I could say more
For they never could
For they never know
For we never learn
That is why no-one
ever returns

XXII

Strange, these things

It shows it knows -
It plays
It tries
to grow

Looking at it
as it seems to see us
In it's reflection
In it's right eye

It glows in it's game
In it's Soul, it shows...

Next time, I'll try
to
bury it better

XXV

There is so much
Knowing in the forgetting
Hating in the hatred
Joy in the enjoyment
of all the trials
denials, Truth
and tears
I AM the Butcher
of all those bloodshot veins
You know now
all you need

to know.